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Postmodernity and postcommunism

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Generalizing between postmodernity and postmodernism is of doubtful value. The shift from communism to postcommunism has led to a decline, or different significance, of postmodernism in Eastern Europe.

The role of the artist in postcommunism

On 4 December 1993, following an annual exhibition, an international symposium was organized by the Institut Français en Hongrie and the Soros Center for Contemporary Arts. The participants of the second panel, art historians, artists, curators, and dealers, were asked to discuss the role of the artist in contemporary Hungary. Some of the artists associated with the project called '42nd Street' maintained that it was the duty of the artist to be involved in social activity and stand for some community, some 'alternative' or 'otherness' – a term that (together with 'open society') has become a cliché in most parts of the postcommunist world.

To what extent is contemporary Hungarian art tied to politics? In most cases the answer is not at all simple. After the official collapse of communism, the sculptor György Jovánovics (b. 1939) was commissioned to design a monument for the site where the martyrs of the 1956 revolution were buried. The artist himself characterized this work as follows: 'It is a misunderstanding to say that the Burial Place No. 301 is a political work. During the previous régime my work was inseparable from politics. (. . .) This time, however, I designed a work that has no political character for a site full of political implications.'[1] Although the monument has become a symbol of the postcolonial state of Eastern Europe, it represents continuity with the earlier avant-garde, especially if compared with the eclecticism of such works as *Rembrandt Studies* (1966) by László Lakner, *In Memory of Malevich* (1980) by István Nádler, *Untitled* (1981) by Tibor Csernus, *The Table* (1995) by Ilona Lovas, or *The Last Supper* (1995) by SI-LA-GY. These five works have two characteristics in common: (a) none of them could be described as having any political message; (b) all of them refer to earlier works of art. What they seem to suggest is that the pictorial equivalent of intertextuality is characteristic of the visual arts of Hungary since the second half of the 1960s. A recent example is *Cryptogram*, a project started in the form of an interactive installation at the exhibition called 'The Butterfly Effect,' in the Kunsthalle of Budapest, in February 1996. Using some sketches of Leonardo, Zoltán Szegedy-Maszák (b. 1969) constructed a draft model of a horse. He linked the points of the surface of the virtual horse to the characters that can be typed into a computer. The resulting image can be viewed in virtual reality. It is possible to fly around or even into the

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virtual horse with the help of a browser.[2] This work would suggest that the following characterization of some cultural phenomena of the First World also applies ot the activity of some younger artists living in what was called the Second World until its collapse in the late 1980s:

> We are left with that pure and random play of signifiers that we call postmodernism, which no longer produces monumental works of the modernist type but ceaselessly reshuffles the fragments of preexistent texts, the building blocks of older cultural and social production, in some new and heightened bricolage: metabooks which cannibalize other books, metatexts which collate bits of other texts – such is the logic of postmodernism in general, which finds one of its strongest and most original, authentic forms in the new art of experimental video. (Ref. 3, p. 96)

Most of the works of video art produced in Eastern Europe in recent years would confirm the view expressed by Katalin Keserü, who was the Director of the Kunsthalle in Budapest in 1993. She insisted that in the postcommunist world artists should liberate themselves from the political and social obligations forced upon them by totalitarianism. According to her assumption that art was dependent on an imminent system of values, she asked Joseph Kosuth, an artist born in Ohio, to represent Hungary at the 1993 Venice Biennale. Kosuth, a conceptualist who rejects the ideal of masterpiece and the distinctions between literature and the visual arts, text and context, text and metatext, has become very influential in such cultural centres of 'Mitteleuropa' as Vienna, Prague, and Budapest. His attitude to modernism can be called somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, he is inclined to dismiss modernism as 'the culture of Scientism' and 'the ideology of industrial capitalism'; on the other hand, he seems to rely on the opposition between art and culture introduced by the avant-garde: 'Art is what we do. Culture is what is done to us'.[4]

Before the Biennale, on 24 February 1993, I asked Kosuth if he thought that his activity was part of 'la condition postmoderne'. He gave the following answer: 'It is a problematic term. I used the term first in 1970. I had an exhibition at the Leo Castelli Gallery where I put up a statement in which I referred to the work as 'post-Modern'. I used it again in writing, I think, in the late 70s when it still was not widely in use as a term. I was then referring to *my* meaning of 1970, which had to do with a feeling that I had nothing to do with the École de Paris or with Jackson Pollock. They were no closer to me than Velázquez.'[5] Instead of using some text by a Hungarian writer, Kosuth decided to rely on a passage from *La coscienza di Zeno* by Italo Svevo for his work in Venice. This served as a pretext for some Hungarian artists to attack Katalin Keserü for having asked Kosuth to represent Hungary in Venice.

At the beginning of 1995 Katalin Keserü was asked by the Hungarian minister of culture to resign from her post, I believe, at least partly because of her objections to the political engagement of Hungarian artists. It may be symptomatic that Róza El-Hassan, a talented artist born in Budapest in 1965, made the following statement: 'artists are being manipulated by political groups that are committed to specific interests. Let me add that I am saying this not pejoratively at all' (Ref. 1, p. 292). I wonder if there is not a touch of cynicism in this statement. In any case, Róza El-Hassan, the daughter of an Arabic businessman, is one of the three artists representing Hungary at the Biennale of 1997. In contemporary Hungary it happens sometimes that an artist is sponsored on the basis of her/his political attitude. The current identification between the market and the media seems to confirm Fredric Jameson's hypothesis that market

ideology 'has less to do with consumption than it has to do with government intervention. (. . .) The market is thus Leviathan in sheep's clothing: its function is not to encourage and perpetuate freedom (let alone freedom of a political variety) but rather to repress it' (Ref. 3, pp. 271, 273).

Western interpretations of postcommunism

In other respects, however, Jameson's analysis may prove to be misleading in view of postcommunism. In general, most theoreticians who attempt to politicize the postmodern seem to ignore the historical experience of the former communist countries. From the perspective of someone who spent several decades in a country controlled by the communists, much of the recent issue of *New Literary History*, entitled 'Cultural Studies: China and the West' (Winter 1997) reads like fairly old-fashioned, rather dogmatic Marxism. (I am more than willing to admit that on the basis of the historical experience of the Third World one might draw an entirely different conclusion.) What Jameson and Eagleton have to say about late capitalism may seem a re-hash of the ideas of György Lukács. Although they have explicitly called into question the simplistic idea that culture is a superstructure determined by underlying forces of production, their thought continues to be implicitly determined by it. In fact, contemporary Marxists often repeat the distorted interpretations of Lukács. One recent example is Jameson's remark in his book on postmodernism that Rilke's archaic Greek torso warns 'the bourgeois subject to change his life' (Ref. 3, pp. 10, 312). This statement echoes the claim made by Lukács in *Die Eigenart des Aesthetischen* (1963) that the message of the poem *Archaischer Torso Apollos* for the reader is 'daß seine im Leben sich betaetigenden Leidenschaften neue Inhalte, eine neure Richtung erhalten, daß sie, derart gereinigt, zu einter seelischen Grundlage von 'tugendhaften Fertigkeit' werden.'[6]

My suspicion is that some Western interpreters of the political implications of postmodernism know relatively little about the relations between politics and art in the former Soviet bloc. A characteristic example is the essay entitled 'The politics of postmodernism after the wall' by Susan Rubin Suleiman, a Harvard professor who was born in Hungary. The essay is a kind of confession based on information gathered by the author during her recent trips to Budapest. The honesty of the interpretation is beyond any doubt. 'Things are not so simple,' she admits, 'The idea of a postmodern paradise in which one can try on new identities like costumes in a shopping mall (. . .) appears to me now as not only naive, but intolerably thoughtless in a world where – again – whole populations are murdered in the name of ethnic identity.'[7]

The problem with such interpretations is that it is rather difficult to characterize postcommunism without some first-hand experience of communism. Although nationalism is a menace not to be neglected, it is by no means the only weakness of the societies of such countries as Czechia, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia or Romania. At the outset of her essay Susan Suleiman refers to what she describes as 'the current joke in Budapest': 'What is the worst thing about communism?', 'What comes after it' (Ref. 7, p. 51). What she fails to specify is the context in which she may have heard the joke. Who was the speaker? Is it possible that it was someone who had a highly privileged life as a member of the political

establishment led by János Kádár? In any case, the society in the former Eastern-bloc countries is so divided that it is quite risky to generalize. While it is justifiable to speak about political and ethical postmodernism, it is not certain that the highly politicized art and culture of former communist countries can be characterized in terms of postmodernism. The master narrative of Marx and Engels's manifesto may have lost its attractiveness but the legacy of totalitarianism is by no means extinct. Former communists often claim that they have forgotten their past. Would it not be somewhat risky to describe their transformation in terms of the dissolution of the subject characteristic of postmodernity? The interpretations of postmodernity made by Jameson and Eagleton seem rather vulnerable since they are based on a less than profound understanding of the Soviet or Chinese systems. Eagleton's argument that 'Mao was about as far from socialism as Newt Gingrich'[8] may reflect a somewhat naive opposition between theory and practice. Only a limited or one-sided acquaintance with Marxism could suggest that Stalinism represented a complete rejection of its entire historical legacy.

To shift our focus to the literature of the former communist world, it is certainly true that even the most lucid theoreticians of postmodernity give little thought to Eastern Europe. Hans Bertens, for instance, speaks of 'the relative marginality of the postmodern impulse within contemporary poetry.'[9] This is probably true if we limit ourselves to Western literatures. In some East-European literatures, however, postmodern verse preceded postmodern fiction. Throughout his long career Sándor Weöres (1913–1989) rejected any claims to originality, advocated radical eclecticism, and confined himself to rewriting and pastiche. In 1972 he published a volume entitled *Psyché* ('Psyche'), a collection that claimed to be by a poetess who lived in the early 19th century. This work, written in a hybrid style, combining elements borrowed from diverse periods, served as a model for Péter Esterházy (b. 1950), who in 1987 published a book entitled *Tizenhét hattyúk* ('Seventeen Swans'), a prose confession by a woman who lived roughly in the same period as the alleged author of *Psyche*. In other works by Weöres several levels of citation are superimposed in a way that contradicts historical teleology. This technique clearly foreshadows the structure of Esterházy's chef-d'oeuvre *Bevezetés a szépirodalomba* ('An Introduction to Belles-lettres,' 1986). Moreover, Weöres also published texts comparable to 'objets trouvés,' doggerels allegedly 'composed' by young children or mentally handicapped people, thereby undermining the privileged status of poetry. Since his death, a remarkable amount of verse has been written incorporating non-standard speech. The de-centring of the self, a self-destructive irony, a radical fragmentation, a reliance on irreconcilable sociolects, and a violation of grammatical rules characterize the short texts of Endre Kukorelly (b. 1951), who consistently tries to avoid the characteristics usually associated with poetry. His activity implies a dissolution of the work-concept, in so far as his constant preoccupation is with the question of what makes the difference between literary and non-literary discourse when there is no perceptible morphological difference between them. Needless to say, this acceptance of everyday speech or ungrammatical discourse represents continuity with Apollinaire's 'poèmes-conversation' and with texts by dadaist authors. Kukorelly's texts served as inspiration for the younger generation. As the interactive installation called *Cryptogram* (inspired by Leonardo's sketches for a sculpture never realized) shows, the distrust of newness in creativity goes together with the use of computers and a blurring or even collapse of the distinction between literature and the visual arts as well as between art and non-art. Other examples, are texts published in the journals *Új Symposion* and

Kalligram (published in Novi Sad and Bratislava, respectively), which would also suggest that, in Eastern Europe, poetry may have given a decisive impetus to postmodern creation.

The status of postmodernism in postcommunism

It follows from what has been said so far that it may be somewhat unwise to accept the idea that postmodern literature was born in the West and later received in the rest of the world. Those who insist on a radical break between the West and the other parts of the world may continue to represent the logic of modernism, in the sense defined by Jameson: 'The moderns thus, with their religion of the new, believed that they were somehow distinct from all the other human beings who ever lived in the past – and also from those non-modern human beings still alive in the present, such as colonial peoples, backward cultures, non-Western societies, and "undeveloped" enclaves' (Ref. 3, p. 389).

Since much of Eastern Europe, Asia and Africa is involved in a love–hate relationship with Western culture, there are serious risks in speaking about the infusion of postmodernism in these regions. Hermeneutics has taught us that appropriation is a dialogue of great complexity. Some of the interpretations current in the US and in Western Europe seem vulnerable from the perspective of the rest of the world. It is certainly unacceptable complacency to assert that 'the history of world art since 1945 has been pretty much the history of American art centered in New York'.[10] The explanation for such provincialism is related to the lack of historical consciousness which Henry James regarded as the basic weakness of American culture: 'the flower of art blooms only where the soil is deep,' he wrote, 'It takes a great deal of history to produce a little literature.'[11] The belief in the hegemony of the United States in contemporary art is inseparable from the misconception that between the end of the Middle Ages and the rise of the avant-garde there was no paradigm shift in artistic conventions, 'perception itself undergoes relatively little change over the period in question – let's say from about 1300 to 1900 – otherwise there would be no possibility of progress: the progress has to be in representations that look more and more like visual reality.' Such a conception is bound up with a simplistic and non-historical attitude to mimesis. The assumption that 'seeing is a lot more like digesting than it is like believing'[12] is in contradiction with the hermeneutic principle that history is part of the meaning of all works of art. The conclusion is inescapable that if reception is taken into consideration, it is by no means easy to perceive the dividing line between modernism and postmodernism.

The idea that there is a consensus on the definition of literary postmodernism will not hold up under scrutiny. The late Hans Robert Jauß described a 'Horizontwandel' in terms of a strong reaction against the 'nouveau roman',[13] whereas Douwe Fokkema included such early works by Robbe-Grillet, Butor, and Ollier as *La jalousie* (1957), *La modification* (1957), and *La mise en scène* (1959) in his list of 'French postmodern texts.'[14] While Jauß insisted that the history of 20th-century literature could be written in terms of a teleological sequence leading from modernism through the avant-garde and late modernism to postmodernism; others defined modernism either in a narrow sense, in almost provincial terms, or lumped it together with the avant-garde. Julio Ortega, for instance, started his essay on Spanish-American postmodernism with the following hypothesis: 'I will use "international modernism" (or modernism in its broadest context) to refer to that innovatory artistic movement that was carried

by Pound, Joyce, and Eliot, but that also coincides with the systematic program of the avant-gardes.'[15] A definition of modernism based on a very limited canon of works written in English by authors whose emphasis on tradition was at odds with the goals of most avant-garde movements may lead to a rather one-sided interpretation of postmodernism.

To what extent are Western theories of postmodernism helpful for an understanding of the culture of Eastern Europe? Of course, it is undeniable that in some of the countries of this region there was hardly any full-fledged modernism. This absence would make the flourishing of postmodernism rather dubious. Moreover, it is not possible to speak of consumer society and information industry in all parts of the former Second World. Still, if we limit ourselves to those countries that can claim to have an important avant-garde legacy as well as a market economy, the difference between Western and East-European literatures seems to be striking at least in one respect: in the former communist countries the rewriting of such popular genres as the Western, the detective story, science fiction, or pseudo-historical fiction is far less widespread. It is difficult to find works that bring out the emptiness of the generic conventions they invoke. *Enciklopedija Mrtvih* (1983) by Danilo Kiš or *Khazarski rečnik* (1984) by Milorad Pavić prove that in Central and Eastern Europe the dichotomy of canonized history versus the falsification of the past makes no sense. For some Croats, Serbian history is pure fiction; the history of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia has lost its credibility since the dissolution of those states; the Hungarian and Romanian versions of Transylvanian history are irreconcilable. The communist interpretation of the past can be called, retrospectively, a wilful distortion but it is still quite difficult to see what may replace it. The contingency of history seems so self-evident that no postmodern rewriting of the historical novel could emerge.

As an 'Epochenbewusstsein', postmodernity has certainly reached the former communist countries. In the words of Arthur C. Danto, 'we have entered a period of post-historical art, where the need for constant self-revolutionization of art is now past'. What I find questionable is the idea that 'we are entering a more stable, more happy period of artistic endeavor where the basic needs to which art has always been responsive may again be met.'[16] The age of pluralism may lead to a decline of taste. Danto's optimism hardly applies to the postcommunist world, in which the younger generations often have no sense of direction. For writers who are at the start of their careers and seem to be convinced that everything has been written, the criteria of progress and overcoming have lost their relevance, value has been reduced to exchange-value, and a distinction between good and bad writing can no longer be made. Their 'Lebensgefühl' corresponds to what Jauß described in the following way: 'Das Paradoxe der wirklichen Welt, in der wir heute leben, liegt darin, daß sie zwar noch nicht geschrieben und doch alles schon gelesen ist, bevor sie für uns existiert.'[17] The negation of the places that had traditionally been assigned to aesthetic experience is simultaneous with the decline of the middle class. The concert hall and the book have lost their popularity and it is still an open question whether the informational technology of the Internet can help us to develop new cultural institutions that can replace the old ones. The thought underlying the ideal of open society that a citizen should not commit him or herself to any particular value-system may lead to a sense of frustration.

While Danto may be right in maintaining that 'possibly it is the work of Post-Modernism that anything can become an influence at any time, a disordered past corresponding to a disordered present and future,'[18] his definition needs to be modified in terms of

reception aesthetics. If something is art when it is declared to be art, the question arises: declared by whom? If the Musée d'Orsay represents an attempt to restore the aesthetic value of 19th-century academic art, it is possible to ask: by whom is the tradition of modernism called into question? One of the reasons why some definitions of postmodernism are vulnerable is that they are based on a sociologically indiscriminate concept of the public.

'Postmodernism is both academic and popular, élitist and accessible,' writes a prominent critic,[19] but she seems to ignore the fact that accessibility is a relative concept. Postmodern novels may be readable for more people than modernist texts, but it might be somewhat misleading to take it for granted that they can also achieve the goals of modernism. The complexity of *Il nome della rosa* is negligible in comparison with that of such works as *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* or *Finnegans Wake*. Let me admit in parenthesis that I cannot share the view held by some that Joyce's late work or Musil's unfinished masterpiece can be associated with postmodernism. If postmodernism is inseparable from the enfranchisement of the commonplace or at least from a desire to supersede the dichotomy between experimentation and a reliance on popular culture, if it is closely tied to a postindustrial situation dominated by a powerful cultural industry, information technologies, and mass media, then the two long novels just mentioned still belong to modernism. In any case, they are very different from clever, opportunistic consumerism. Warhol's appetite for money and huge earnings are in violent contrast to Webern's lack of interest in financial considerations and commercial success. It would be a mistake not to admit that such highly talented artists as Eco, Warhol, or Philip Glass make evident concessions to be more immediately grasped by a wide public. This demands a partial renunciation of the legacy of such masters as Joyce, Schwitters and Webern. With some reservation it is true that while in modernism the artist is a producer *against*, in postmodernism she or he is a producer *for* society.

As for the dialogue between high and popular culture, it has to be remembered that there were periods in the past in which the borderline between elevated art and vulgar taste was muted if not erased. The relevance of 'noch nicht' and 'nicht mehr' was at least suspended in Biedermeier and Art Nouveau culture. It is hardly accidental that it is relatively easy to find examples of kitsch in these three periods. The attempt of Western postmodernism to bridge the gap between high and popular culture has inspired a kind of conformism in Eastern Europe. The acceptance of international mass products goes together with a condemnation of élitism that is used by some as a pretext for reviving the artistic eclecticism of the communist decades. Recently, a critic of Chinese birth spoke about a 'combination of "socialist realism" and American pop,'[20] thus reminding us that socialist realism may appear acceptable in a situation in which the legitimacy of high culture is seriously questioned.

The end of postmodernism?

It is not possible to generalize about the relations between postmodernity and postcommunism. To understand the role of postmodernism in China one has to be familiar with Chinese history. The same applies to Eastern Europe. I am not qualified to make any statements about Asia, but I can risk hypotheses about the former Warsaw Pact countries. While in the 1980s postmodernism seemed to be the dominant literary trend in Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia or Hungary, by the 1990s this trend has lost much of its power. The deaths of such prominent

writers as Kiš, Hrabal or Heiner Müller were a serious loss, others disappointingly seemed to repeat themselves, and several works appeared that are unrelated to postindustrialism and the cult of pastiche. There is a general feeling that East-European culture was more exciting in the 1980s than it has been since the political changes that occurred around 1990. Esterházy is fond of saying that he has no words for the present situation, and his latest books are collections of articles. While it is true that in the former Eastern bloc there was a strong tradition dating back to the age of the Reformation that makes the successful author a public institution, this does not change the fact that Hungary has gained a publicist but may have lost a fine novelist. Although only the followers of György Lukács, commuting between the New School for Social Research and Budapest, would accept Jameson's idea that postmodernism is a First World invention, the cultural dominant of late capitalism, it could be argued that the shift from communism to postcommunism may have led to a decline of postmodernism.

One of the most memorable works of fiction published in recent years is *Sinistra körzet* ('*Sinistra District*,' 1992) by Ádám Bodor (b. 1936), a frightening account of the political nightmare of Ceauşescu's Romania, written in a style that has none of the structural tricks, metafictional or self-referential devices usually associated with postmodernism. Although some would point to multiculturalism and autobiographical character in Bodor's fiction, such analogies are misleadingly superficial. The Transylvanian-born writer's prose is extremely economical and free of any allusions. The fate of the hero of *Sinistra District* is no less or more an extension of the author's life than the destiny of any first-person narrator. In fact, the narrative perspective is somewhat ambiguous: in some chapters the main character is the narrator, in others a third person refers to him and he is portrayed with as much 'impassibilité' as any other human being. He is a survivor whose story is about a form of existence in which there is no individual freedom and human fate is regulated by invisible forces. The world of totalitarianism is presented in terms of heightened fictionality that suggests no traffic between high and low culture. There is no trace of rewriting, recontextualization, or overcoded playfulness. In comparison with this world, the absurdity of *Malone meurt* may appear to be a somewhat tongue-in-cheek seriousness. While some readers may find humour in Kafka or Beckett, there is hardly any trace of the witty in the work of Bodor. His characters live in forests surrounding the river called Sinistra. Except for some bureaucrats the only inhabitants of this district are people who have been sent there by way of punishment. The hero is visiting this region with the purpose of finding his adopted son. The young man follows the example of many others by committing suicide in an astonishingly cruel manner, and the hero escapes from the territory.

In the West the complaint is often made that the collapse of communism has given rise to nationalism in Eastern Europe. Bodor's work suggests that the reaction against international capitalism and postmodernism is not necessarily tied to ethnocentrism.

Several other works could be cited as confirming the thesis that more and more artists seem to reject postmodern eclecticism. A recent example is *Az élősködő* ('*The Parasite*,' 1997) by Ferenc Barnás (b. 1959). It is the first novel by a writer who has a university doctorate in literature but earns his living as a flautist in Western Europe. Characteristically, in 1996 the manuscript was rejected by a publisher for the reason that it seemed unrelated to any current literary trend. Although a careful reader could possibly detect the influence of Hesse and other German writers in this book, intertextuality is almost entirely absent from it. Like *Sinistra*

District, *The Parasite* is the confession of a man whose only meaningful experience seems suffering. The difference between the two works is that while in the earlier book the narrator is able to leave the world controlled by torturers, in the later novel the narrator-hero faces self-destruction. From this refusal of resolution comes the aptness of the style for the representation of anguish and the macabre. This kind of writing has nothing in common with the recycling of the elements of popular fiction. The confessional tone is combined with a passionate interest in selfhood and 'Dasein'; that is why *The Parasite* has been compared to an eschatological meditation.[21] Being is understood as corporeality and language, and the words seem uttered prior to and beyond all distinguishing between bodiliness and spirituality. The struggle to find words concerns the relation of language and body, and is presented as the most profound struggle in which one can engage. The emphasis on the linguistic nature of experience is in harmony with the tradition of Nietzsche, Heidegger and Gadamer. The idea underlying the narrator's confession is that we do not use language but require it, because 'Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache.'[22]

The most interesting literature coming from Eastern Europe is closely related to the sufferings of the people who spent their formative years in communism. Bodor has left Romania for Hungary but is haunted by the memories of the activities of the Securitate, and the nightmares related by some other writers are also linked to the political system that cannot be forgotten by those who had lived in it. *The Parasite*, on the other hand, represents an ontological discourse with no apparent political implications. Both types of writing are a far cry from postmodern literature. What they seem to suggest is that it is a simplification to believe that global changes in society call for a certain kind of writing. Ironically, arguments about postmodernism as the cultural dominant of late capitalism may remind those with direct experience of communism of the ideology of a totalitarianism that can hardly be forgotten.

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